

Concepts: A Double-Edged Sword



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“The Self Owner” is an original weekly column appearing every Wednesday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Spencer W. Morgan. Spencer is a husband and father, and has studied History and Philosophy at the University of Utah. Archived columns can be found [here](#). OVP-only RSS feed available [here](#).

Now that we’ve thoroughly examined man’s condition as a free, choosing agent and his moral entitlement to self-ownership, I’d like to start drawing connections between this principle and the world of group abstractions that surrounds us. We’ve already discussed at length the state and its parasitic nature, but this week I’d like to take a step back and address these collective group abstractions in general and how we should be reigning them in.

Our uniquely human conceptual and imaginative ability is wonderful. Children are born with this capacity, and one of my favorite things as a parent has been to watch it develop in my two daughters. Children tend to use their imagination harmlessly, while fully aware of its detachment from reality. I watched my daughter Marissa form her own unique concept as a small child, called a “bomp.” She started applying this concept to things she observed, and eventually I was able to learn from her applications that a “bomp” meant a rapidly moving object, living or otherwise, whose movement was exciting and unpredictable.

Concepts are a critical guide for interpreting and applying the signals we receive from our senses, and they allow us to prepare for situations in reality that we have not yet encountered. By forming a general mental concept about something (for example, a chair) we can have a larger, objective guide for how we approach our encounters with chairs. Without this capacity, we would see each instance of a chair we might encounter as an isolated object containing four legs, a flat surface, etc. From this example we can see how foundational the conceptual ability is to science, economic exchange, innovation, and more.

The Danger in Unrestrained Concepts

The most important thing to understand is that the “chair” part, or the part that is our larger concept, does not literally exist. What exists is the materials that make up the chair,

in the shape we have come to associate conceptually as a chair. The concept itself, however, exists only as a mental formation we have made as rational beings to guide our interactions with reality. This may seem basic, but it is essential to understand and continue to apply when we start dealing with more complex concepts.

As we age, the lines separating our concepts from the literal reality they serve to help us navigate can become blurred. We, unfortunately, come to believe that our concepts exist in reality in many cases. One of the most revealing and persistently agitating things I've encountered in the last few years has been the typical reaction a person has when I say "the government does not exist." Admittedly, I am doing this to get a reaction and their attention, and don't immediately expect them to understand my meaning, which is that the state itself is merely a fictional concept applied to a group of human beings, certain buildings, etc., but which has no actual manifestation itself in reality. It is interesting to watch however, that even with careful explanation of those nuances, the resistance that many feel. There seems to be a deep need, for many people, to believe that the government does itself have an existence apart from the individual actors who act under that label.

Almost 2,500 years ago, the philosopher Plato made a very grave mistake from which western philosophy and religion have yet to recover. Plato viewed the conceptual as real, and even theorized that a perfect world of "forms" existed, of which our flawed, material world was a degraded subset. Since then, all of the Christian thinkers and writers of philosophy (and there have been many) who have adopted this premise have made the mistake of trying to subordinate reality to man's imagination, instead of *vice versa*. This can be a harmless enough fantasy (or at least harmless to all but our selves) until we start adopting concepts as a society that become an accepted basis for aggression to others. Next week I will discuss how government is such concept.